

AMAZING STORIES



October 1936
25 Cents

UNCERTAINTY

by John W. Campbell, Jr.

W. K. SONNEMANN.

LESLIE F. STONE

AMAZING STORIES

Science Fiction

Vol. 10

OCTOBER, 1936

No. 12

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Cover and Illustrations by Morey

Our Cover depicts a scene from "Uncertainty"

Published Bi-Monthly by

TECK PUBLICATIONS, INC.,

Office of publication, 29 WORTHINGTON STREET, SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

Executive and Editorial Offices: 461 Eighth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Lee Ellmaker, Pres. and Treas.

B. M. Holcepl, Sec'y.

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25c a copy, \$1.50 a year, Canada and Foreign Countries, \$1.75.

Subscribers are notified that change of address must reach us five weeks in advance
of the next date of issue.

English Agent—Atlas Publishing & Distributing Co., Ltd., 18, Bride Lane, Fleet St., London, E. C. 4, England

The Human Pets of Mars

By LESLIE F. STONE

One of the nicest features of this story is that its much admired authoress has brought in an excellent picture of human nature with the characteristics of man and woman in an absolutely bewildering environment. The combination of human nature with the strange Martian beings is most amusingly put before us.

CHAPTER I

MISTS had hung above Washington all the morning, then with their clearing at noon the city grew aware of the strange machine hovering a few thousand feet in the air, above the Washington Monument. Never had there been seen a stranger ship. Golden in color, it looked like a huge round cheese-box, or a drum, only monstrous in size, a good thousand feet in diameter.

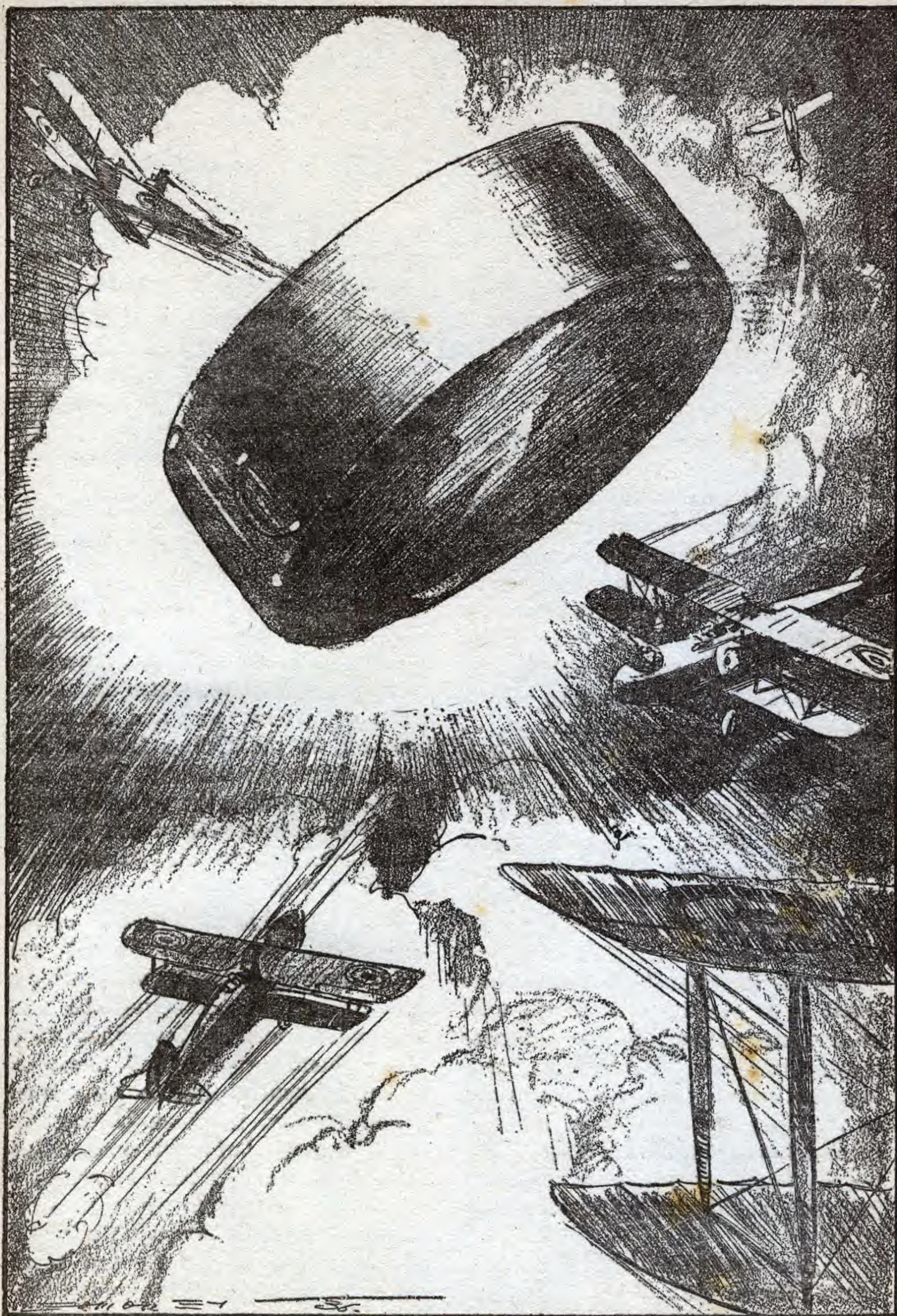
The President, from the verandah of the White House, saw it. People crowded to office windows, and into the streets. As far as Chevy Chase they saw it, and housewives came into the streets to stare in wonder and in fear. Then, as it was seen that the thing was about to land, was drifting to the municipal golf-links on Haines Point in Lower Potomac Park, wild excitement reigned. Some motorists thought to escape from the city, heading northward, or crossed the river to the Virginia shore; but most of them followed the Drum-Ship, pushing in upon the Point, driving the hurriedly augmented police-force half crazy.

Orders were dispatched from the White House. The Police Commissioner was directed to deploy his corps upon the golf-links; every fort

near the city was warned to stand in readiness for action; planes were ordered out from Boeling Field and the Naval Hangars. No one had any idea from where the golden ship had come. Was it in peace or in war? Did it come from the other side of the world?

Now it was descending, dropping lightly upon the links. A circular opening in its side gave a glimpse of its shining interior, golden as its exterior. People shrieked and screamed, however, as the Things from within emerged into the sunlight. Those who had been crowding the police forward fought to retreat, restrained only by those behind, who also fought and screamed to get away

At first no one was certain of his impression, but already an intrepid radio announcer with his portable microphone was describing the horrors as they emerged from their ship. Six of them, forty-feet tall. Octopods he called them at first, but a second glance showed them as having ten tentacles instead of eight, surmounted by a flabby sack-like body topped by a round soft head from which projected the tentacles, possessing a round rubbery toothless mouth and three lidless staring eyes. Five of the tentacles had large, padded foot-like extremities, while the remaining five,



Planes circled overhead, also firing upon the drum-ship, but with no apparent effect. The shells simply bounced back.

which were held furled around the hairless bodies, like rosettes, ended in small ten fingered hands, having two thumbs.

In color the creatures appeared a dull black over which lay a golden sheen that caught and reflected the light, and unlike true octopods the tentacles possessed no sucker cups, but were smooth. Decapods was a better name for them, and the announcer revised his first description by substituting that name.

After climbing from their ship, these awful visitants stood staring at the frightened mob, their lidless eyes flickering in this direction and that, but they made no hostile move toward the populace. From them could be heard high piping sounds, like the chirping of birds. Then, they discovered the Washington Channel that lay dimpling in the sun between the Point and the city-wharves.

In one accord all six beasts moved toward the water, the people crowding out of their path. General Tass, director of police, ordered a cordon of his men to block their way, but they proved no obstacle, as the monsters simply stepped over their ranks, carefully, so as not to tread upon them, and made their way to the water.

One of their number was seen to dip an unfurled "arm" into the water, then with a loud plop lowered itself into the Channel, the others following. There, like happy school-boys, they disported themselves, their gargantuan play causing high waves that went careening against either shore, rocking the yachts anchored there, swamping some of the smaller boats. Then, they were climbing ashore at the wharfs to make a peaceable tour of the city, doing no more damage than the pilfering of a few fruit carts

along the Avenue, and scaring motorists out of their wits.

In a quandary Washington gave them the right of way, while scientists from the Smithsonian hurried to the city proper, hoping to communicate with them, to learn whence they had come, to study their science; but the monsters, who spoke among themselves in their high fluty tones, gave the scientists no time to catch up with them, simply stepping over each new obstacle put in their way. Capturing them, for the moment, seemed out of the question, and since they appeared completely unarmed, and apparently inoffensive as far as their intentions were an indication, nothing was done for the nonce, except that the police sought to untangle the traffic jams they caused everywhere.

General Tasse, abiding by orders, had tried to give them a motor-cycle escort, to clear the way ahead, but the beasts had disregarded this honor, as they seemed to disregard everything else of their startled hosts, deserting the escort whenever something in another street attracted their attention, leaving the police officers to catch up with them as best they could.

For several hours this continued, and in that time engineers from the Bureau of Standards attempted to make something of the unprotected ship, having hurried to the Point in auto-gyros. Only, as the decapods themselves defied the attention of the scientists, so had their ship's motors defied the engineers. Never had they seen such machines, no two alike, resembling nothing of Earth.

For instance, one machine was found to be six-sided, and each part simply a multiple of pentagons. Another had eight sides, a third was a series of three-sided figures, every-

thing within coinciding with that shape. In color they were golden, like the ship itself, and transparent. On entering the drum-ship, the engineers had been startled to discover that whereas they could not see within the ship from without, from inside, they could see everything beyond perfectly clearly. Altogether, the ship was alluringly obscure.

The march of the decapods lasted for about three hours, although, actually, they did not get very far—merely wandering through the business district of the city and some of its monumental Government Buildings—owing to the fact that they went, for the most part, in circles. Now, they seemed restless, anxious to return to their ship, and in a body they headed for the Washington Monument, like a finger pointing to the sky. Reaching its foot, one of their number proceeded to climb the obelisk—on the OUTSIDE.

A few minutes later it descended once again, joining its fellows. It had taken bearings, found the drum-ship, and under its leadership, the five others started back for the municipal links, crossing the railroad embankment to do so.

Possibly, the capture of life specimens of this world came only as a second thought to the decapods when, suddenly, a child excitedly dashed in front of them to reach its mother beyond them. A prolonged shriek went up from the crowd of onlookers who had milled over the golf links all these hours. For the child never reached its mother. Instead, it found itself lifted high in the air, in the hand of the foremost of the decapods!

With only a thought to save the child Officer McCarthy spurred his horse, Prince, forward. And the next instant, he, too, like the child was

raised aloft with his horse. He may have saved himself, but his first reaction was to cling to his kicking horse, and when he had straightened in his saddle, he found himself too high in the air to dare to jump. . . .

CHAPTER II

THE Bureau of Standard engineers were still delving into the unguessable secrets of the drum-ship when it was discovered that the monsters were returning. Pell-mell they ran out, piling helter-skelter into their auto-gyros. That is all but Brett Rand and his chum, George Worth. Never in his twenty-seven years had Brett come upon a machine whose essentials he could not grasp in an hour's time. It was said of him that he had teethered upon a stilson wrench, and it was true that when other kids were taking toys apart, he was putting small motors together, and making them "go." Where his fellows were ready to give up, he was only beginning to tinker.

Had there been a wire or cable, he might have traced it to its source, but there was nothing among those multi-sided machines of transparent golden metal that he could actually put his finger on as familiar. Somehow, he had removed the top of a peculiarly flat machine, and with an experienced screw-driver was feeling around the strange array of parts, although, to tell the truth, there were no screws to tempt his implement.

It was only by super-human effort that George managed to pull him away from the machine, to drive into his one-track mind that the decapods at that moment, were returning to the ship. Brett had not liked being disturbed, in fact, a sharp elbow caught George under the chin, sent him

a-sprawl. But he came back and managed to draw Brett toward the doorway. Only it was too late.

The decapods were upon them; one already about to enter the ship. And not empty-handed either. In one arm was a wildly kicking horse, in whose tilted saddle a police-officer clung, in another a small girl of about six, who, in turn, clasped a mewling kitten to her breast. An ashen-faced negro was caught in a third coiled arm, while in the fourth, a belligerent, red-faced matron dressed in neat serge and wearing a stiff sailor hat, pummeled the monster with a tightly rolled umbrella. Other beasts following the first were also loaded down with captives, men, women, youths; white and black, without discrimination. There was even a wire-haired terrier among the captives.

At bay, the two young men scarcely knew what to do. Behind them lay the motor room, a large circular chamber in the center of the ship, reached by a corridor. And from that opened a half a dozen wedge-shaped rooms, shaped so, to conform to the contour of the ship. Retreating before the oncoming monsters with their captives, they reached the central room first, then dashed into one of the smaller chambers, bare, but for a number of metallic straps hanging here and there from the ceiling, with a wide circular mat upon the floor.

Outside, they could hear the rat-tat of gun-fire; the police and soldiers attempting to rescue the prisoners, shooting low at the feet of the decapods, shots that simply *ricocheted from their flesh without the least damage*. Planes circled overhead, also firing upon the drum-ship, but with no apparent effect. The shells *simply bounced back!*

Through the wall of their retreat

Brett and George saw the monsters deposit their prisoners in a second chamber, then close the door upon them, and turn to their machines. There was some tootings when the top was found off the machine Brett had tinkered with, and looking up one of the beasts discovered the culprits. The next instant it was coming toward them.

Brett still retained his screw-driver. Certainly he did not consider it much of a defensive weapon, his was more the natural reaction of a treed man as he let it fly toward the decapods. However, the missiles never reached the eye for which Brett had unconsciously aimed, as a small hand caught it mid-air, the beast scarcely changing its stride as it came on.

"LOOK OUT," cried George, "it's going to gas us. Cover your face"

But there was no protection from the orange vapor that suddenly issued from the creature's small mouth. It filled the room, and the pair found themselves drifting away

What followed had been a page out of a nightmare. Brett, sinking into the artificial coma induced by the orange gas, was aware of a terrific detonation, then a horrible sinking sensation that gripped his stomach—and oblivion.

HE woke to a semi-consciousness aware of a splitting headache and an awful nausea. There was darkness around him, a deep black velvety darkness, in which great sparkling stars shone in the middle distances. He was aware of a groaning and moaning all around him, but was unable to orient himself, going into one intermittent doze after another. That he was fed during the hours that followed, he could remember, although

the thought of food made his stomach turn over. However, unable to avoid the ministrations of a nurse bending over him with a large spoon-like spoon, he had been forced to partake, the first mouthful, oddly enough, easing his sickness. The undefinable stuff had been both food and drink, quenching thirst and settling the stomach.

Then, after an indeterminable period, had come the cessation of the motor's throbbing present through his dreams, and with his fellow captives he was borne from the ship, mind clear once more, into a strange towering building wherein monsters, the same as those who had captured him, examined him, probed and pinched. Long afterwards he could still hear the screams of the three who had died under the knife, their living flesh having been dissected by their inhuman captors.

From there they had been carried into an immense hall where took place an assembling of thousands of decapods. The chamber held a wide dais, ten feet high, and before it the captives were awaiting the next event.

Finding himself still whole, Brett raised himself upon his elbow to look around. The chamber was perhaps a thousand yards in diameter, oval in shape, with two great doorways at either end, through which the black decapods were pouring. He shuddered anew at the sight of them, then turned his eyes to his fellows, who were likewise beginning to take cognizance of their surroundings.

He recognized the severely dressed matron whom he had seen the day of their capture, still wearing her stiff hat, and holding her umbrella in one hand. Immediately he dubbed her the Militant Matron, the term fitted so well. Near her, feet sprawled

out before him, squatted a middle-aged man in a neat business-suit, florid of face, who even in these circumstances could retain his pomposity. "The Senator" seemed the title best to fit him. A colored woman lay supine on the floor not far away, moaning and sighing as she mumbled something about the "Lawd's judgement," and beside her sat a tooth-chattering blue-jeaned negro.

There were more, a pale faced man of indeterminate age, nondescript of coloring, who may have been a haberdasher's clerk,—a small young matronish-looking woman with a face filled with terror,—a tall, lean, dehydrated spinster,—a not too neatly dressed young man with inquisitive eyes that darted here and there, taking everything in. Then, there was the small girl with her kitten, still held tightly in her arms, who stared around with wide-open eyes, and a little boy a few years her senior lying on the floor, sobbing his heart out, while not far away crouched a seventeen year old girl, with ultra-high heels, a rumpled though modish silk dress, and a tiny crush hat, clasping an oversize purse against her chest.

There were others, but Brett's survey suddenly came to an end, for on turning around he found himself staring into the coolest pair of the bluest eyes he had ever seen. She would never have won a beauty contest, her features were too irregular, her mouth too generously wide, yet she possessed that inner something, which so often lifts the ordinary-appearing woman out of mediocrity. Fair-skinned, with a mop of chestnut hair framing an oval face, her main features were the bright intelligent blue eyes with their steady gaze.

"We—we seem to have arrived," she murmured. "Will you pinch me,

please, so I can find out if I'm dreaming or not?"

Brett gave another glance around. "No, I don't think we're dreaming, but those creatures certainly look like they've come out of a nightmare." He jerked his head toward the monsters slowly filling the vast hall in great circles, each squatting on the floor as it found its place among its fellows.

"And I thought it would be a great thing to do a paper on them, for biology class. I'm studying at the George Washington University that is—I was"

"And I—" Brett suddenly realized that, but for his intense interest in those damnable machines, George and he would not be here. Contrition filled his heart, and he looked around for George. George was coming toward him, carrying the little eight year old boy in his arms.

"Will someone please look after this kid? He's crying his eyes out for his mother"

The blue eyed girl took the boy from George's arms. "I wanna go home, I want my muvver," he was muttering.

At that the little girl with the kitten looked up from her pet, and crawled to their side. "It's all right," she told the little boy. "This is just one of my bad dreams. I have lots of 'em, but I always wake up in my own little bed at home!"

And, as if that settled the question, she turned back to her mewling kitten. The boy looked at the speaker and grunted, then closed his eyes without a word. Brett and the girl exchanged glances.

But there was no more room for conversation, the hall had filled up; hundreds and hundreds of decapods squatted in close ranks. Suddenly, as if at a signal they all stood up, turn-

ing their bodies so that they faced one of the two doorways, through which was coming an immense monster, some ten feet taller than the tallest.

"Must be the high Mogul," muttered George, "look, he's got a retinue, too."

The massive creature was progressing down a lane opened for it, surrounded by ten smaller creatures, smaller even than the majority of the decapods. Reaching the dais, the Mogul as George had called him, took his place upon the platform, half reclining, while his ten followers stood at attention in a circle around him. Thereupon, a great sound went up from the throats of his subjects, and every beast unfurled its five arms, raising them on high. Not until the rites that followed were at end, did they drop them again.

UNAWARE of what was to take place the captives drew together, waiting nervously. The negro wench began to pray in a high hysterical voice, a woman sobbed in the gathering, and Brett heard the "Senator" declare: "I'll have them know that they can't do this to a citizen of the United States"

Now six decapods were coming forward until they stood just on the edge of the circle surrounding the dais, beyond the captives. One of their number commenced to speak in its high fluty tones, addressing the giant creature on the dais. For twenty minutes or so it orated, and no sooner had it ceased than a second of the six took its place.

"Looks like an endurance test," whispered Brett to George when half an hour later the third decapod commenced to speak.

"You know, I believe these are the

six monsters that brought us here. They're reporting upon their expedition"

"Yes, but our captors possessed a golden sheen. These are all solid black Why—of course—they were wearing armour, George. That's the reason our bullets didn't hurt them."

"Right—some of that transparent gold of theirs"

"Have you any idea where we are?"

"Only that we're no longer on Earth. Notice how light you feel? As if you've had a few pounds lifted from your shoulders?"

Brett raised an arm. "Why yes, there is a difference here. Notice how much faster we're all breathing? Wherever this world is, George, it's smaller than Earth. And to think I got you into this, when"

"Aw don't start that stuff, kid. It may not be as bad as it seems. There, the last chappie is making his speech. Maybe we'll find out where we stand now"

Looking up Brett saw that the sixth decapod was now making its speech, but he was unprepared for what happened next, as a long tentacle shot into the midst of the captives, grabbing up the little six year old with her kitten! Hands caught him on either side as he started to the defense of the child. It was George and the blue-eyed girl.

"Wait—perhaps they won't hurt her. She's being shown off to the Mogul."

Brett cooled down as he saw the child had come to no harm, but now stood on the dais before the huge squatting monster. Unconcerned, she gave him look for look, but let out a wail when the same hand that had grabbed her up, pulled her pet out of her arms. But it was only to hold the

tabby before the Mogul's eyes, then it was returned to its owner. Thereupon, the child was lifted to the floor once again, and this time it was the policeman, McCarthy, and his horse that were hoisted to the platform.

McCarthy had been standing beside the animal with hand on its muzzle, trying to calm it, for the creature was wild-eyed and all in a tremble. It gave a high squeal as the long arm came down upon it. Unceremoniously McCarthy was lifted to the saddle, regardless of the fact that he was placed there backwards; and it was only by gripping the saddle wildly that he managed to stick on, as he and the kicking horse went through the air.

He swung himself around in the saddle, just as the horse reared on its hind feet, thereby displaying a fine feat of horsemanship as he held his seat. But as soon as he had quieted the horse, the same hand that had put him there plucked him from the saddle. Then, no sooner was he on his feet than he was placed upon the saddle once again. This was repeated a number of times for the edification of the ruler who tittered in his high shrill voice over this phenomenon. Evidently, the decapod could not understand just why the horse and man came apart. A murmuring came from the close packed ranks of the assembly as well.

When the pair were returned to their places on the floor it came the turn of the Militant to be examined. Her face went beet-red and when she stood before the Mogul she told him in no uncertain terms what she thought of her treatment, explaining that whereas she was a D.A.R. and an F.F.V. it behooved the creatures to return her straightwith to her Virginia home.

She might as well have talked to

the wind for all the attention the monsters paid her. One of the negroes was lifted to her side, and by the manner of the lecturer the others saw that the decapod was pointing out the difference of the coloring of the pair to the king.

Following that, each captive in turn was lifted to the platform to be oogled, and then returned to his place. Brett had looked forward with loathing to the touch of the decapod tentacle, but when it came his turn, he found that the arm felt like old well-worn leather, its temperature only slightly below that of his own.

The inspection ended, the Mogul next addressed the assembly and the six intrepid explorers. Then, he seemed to be giving instructions. Six long arms darted among the captives, and six of them were indiscriminately plucked up. Next, the ten creatures of the Mogul's retinue chose those among the group that they desired, lifting them high in their arms. Two more decapods were called forth from the innermost circle surrounding the dais, to pick up the two other captives, and the assembly was at an end.

Dropping off the platform, the Mogul hurried from the chamber followed by a creature bearing McCarthy and his horse aloft, then one by one the others followed with their burdens.

Outdoors Brett discovered they were in a great plaza covered with red sand, in the center of which was an artificial lake fed by a canal coming from a "thicket" of towers that surrounded the plaza on all sides. Overhead was a blood-red sun riding in a copperish sky.

THE towers, for the most part, were uniform in size and height, some fifty feet in diameter, rising

about four hundred feet into the air, and were of the same golden metal that the decapods appeared to use in all their projects. Across the plaza from the large building that had contained the assembly chamber, was a second tower of the same size. These two buildings broke the monotony of the uniformity of the decapod city.

Brett suddenly discovered that the Earth captives were not to be kept together, instead their captors were going off in all directions, some crossing the plaza, some going southward and others northward. To his wonder, he saw the ruler climbing the tower they had just quitted—*on the outside*.

A closer scrutiny showed that the monster was climbing by means of heavy bars affixed to the wall at intervals of ten feet, climbing hand over hand, until he looked like a pin-wheel. And following him came the creature bearing McCarthy and his horse, the pair held in one furred arm while the other four were used to pull the monster up the unique stair-case.

In the side of the building he saw round openings spaced fifty feet apart, and it was into one of these doorways that the captives were borne. His own horse was already moving away from the tower in company with the pair carrying the Militant Matron, and the tall blue-jeaned negro whose name he was to learn as Jeff.

Looking around for George, Brett found he was being taken across the plaza. The blue-eyed girl had already disappeared as had some of the others.

At a tower not far from the Royal Palace wherein McCarthy had disappeared with the Mogul, Brett's captor came to a halt, and he realized they were about to mount it. The decapod took a firmer hold around his waist

and grasping the nearest rung of the ladder started upward. With only those stationary bars between heaven and earth Brett trembled more than once, but the creature was sure-handed, and shortly they were entering the topmost chamber of the tower.

The room conformed to the shape of the building, fifty feet in diameter, circular; and its walls, like the sides of the Drum-Ship were transparent. But for a number of hanging straps and a heavy red mat in the center of the room, it was bare. He had been puzzled by those hanging straps in the Drum-Ship, but now he was to learn their purpose.

Dropping him on the smooth floor, the beast crossed the room to a strap dangling to within ten feet of the floor, and climbed upon it. It constituted the decapodian chair, and from that vantage spot the weird creature surveyed him—like a spider watching a fly, was the man's thought.

Giving it stare for stare he slowly got to his feet. A sidelong glance showed him that he was nearest to the door they had come through. Could he reach it before the monster? Then his shoulders sagged. He could never get down that inhuman ladder. He was truly a prisoner, three hundred and fifty feet above the ground. With resignation he awaited the beast's next move.

It came as the monster flashed out a long tentacle that grabbed him up—and tossed him the full length of the room!

Dazed, he slowly struggled to his feet, wondering what sardonic play this was to be, when he found himself unceremoniously dragged back across the floor toward the beast. Yet no sooner had it brought him to its feet than it tossed him again against

the furthest wall! With rising choler he shook his fist at it, asking himself if first it intended to break his bones, before devouring him, railing at the thought that he was so defenseless.

His answer was repeated dragging over the floor, a third toss across the room, a third drag back. But the fourth toss found him lying where he had fallen, bruised and weak, mind in a whirl. Then into his consciousness came half-understanding. Suddenly he realized that with each drag across the floor had come a high piping tone from the monster. Even now it was piping at him.

Slowly he got to his feet, to try out his analysis. This time the engaging arm did not come out to meet him as he limped toward his master—answering its whistle.

He understood. He was being taught to "come here!"—even as he had taught his own dogs to answer his call—only less ferociously.

Reaching the spot just below where the beast was dangling from its overhead strap he paused, waiting. A tiny hand came down to pat his cheek, then to make certain he had really learned his lesson it shoved him away again—more gently this time. And with more alacrity the man obeyed the whistle. He had learned.

Slipping to the floor the beast next moved over to the matting where it squatted, drawing Brett toward it. He found himself laid upon the floor to the accompaniment of soft pattings and a chucking, like that used by a hen to call her chicks under her wing. Making no move, he awaited the creature's next action, and heard again the high whistle. Rising and coming to its side he received another pat on his cheek. He had learned to "lie-down."

Several times this was repeated, then certain he had learned both simple lessons, the decapod appeared to lose interest in him, leaving him to his own devices for the time. But Brett did not want to be left alone. He decided it was high time to teach the monster that he, likewise, was a thinking creature.

Feeling around in his pockets he was disappointed to find he was without a pencil. In fact, his pockets yielded little else but a handkerchief, some coins and bills, a cigarette lighter without fuel. He remembered that on that memorable day when the decapods had invaded Washington, he had risen late, and failed to stock his pockets with his usual accessories. He didn't even have cigarettes.

However, that did not matter. He would try some other expedient. The decapod, he found, had its eyes turned away from him, was looking at the red sun that had sunk somewhat since they had entered the room, lying now just above the tower-tops. Going to its side, he tapped an arm lying in reach, to attract the creature's attention.

Slowly it turned its head to look at him, and even cocked its head when he addressed it, moving his lips slowly, forming words that he knew it could not understand. A little hand reached out toward his mouth, but beyond that the beast showed little interest in his demonstration. Thereupon, he pointed toward the lowering sun, and squatting on the floor used his finger to draw an imaginary sun there. But he could have saved the effort. Glancing up again, he found that the monster had turned away, was rising to go to the open doorway.

He watched in despair as it peered outside, looking down at the ground, realizing that the creature's mind

told it that he was an inferior animal, and that was all there was to it. Having an intelligence of a vastly different order than that of Man, the decapods were unable to conceive the fact that an Earth-man was a thinking entity. Possibly to them Man was no more than a new type of animal; his buildings and industry having impressed them no more than the community life of an ant impresses the average man—aside from his wonder at the analogy of that life to his own.

Man to them was no more than the animals he himself domesticates. Possibly, too, they judged the buildings of Washington natural outcroppings of Nature, since they were unlike their own tower-buildings.

Thinking thus, Brett realized his own status, and that of his fellow-captives. They were pets—nothing else. To be regarded as no higher a development than the creatures indigenous to this land, that, later, he was to learn, the beasts tamed for their own pleasure.

It was a hard pill to swallow, and sorrowfully he considered the plight of his fellows, wondering how they were taking this intelligence. Would they submit or attempt to fight back? He thought of the blue-eyed girl and of George. Would they appreciate their new standing and act accordingly? Then, he smiled as he thought of the Militant Matron and the pompous Senator. He'd like to have seen them in the process of their "training."

CHAPTER III

CONSIDERING these things the man realized that the room was growing dark, that the sun was sinking, painting the sky garishly in deep reds, blue and greens. But

before the chamber became wholly dark a newcomer entered.

Staying at its post beside the doorway, the first decapod suddenly began to chirp loudly in some excitement. Glancing through the transparent wall of the tower, Brett discovered that a second monster was mounting it. Immediately the room was filled with shrill tootings, and to his wonder the new arrival was giving the other a terrific whacking on its body and limbs.

He drew back, expecting a fight, but instead the pair settled themselves upon the matting in the center of the room quite amicably. He saw that the newcomer was somewhat larger than the first, ebon black in color, its tentacles more massive, its body thicker, whereas in contrast, the smaller beast was almost a chocolate brown. Could it be that they were male and female, and that this was an ordinary home-coming?

That it was, he learned in the days that followed. Each morning the black male left the city of towers in a small replica of the Drum-Ship that had brought Brett and his fellows here, returning at evening to the tower-room.

Following their greetings to each other, the smaller decapod, whom Brett dubbed Missis, for want of a better name—calling the other Mister in turn—dragged him forward to show him off to her lord and master. By her shrill whistlings Brett guessed she was explaining the happenings of the day, the Mogul's presentation of the pet to her. Mister did not appear overjoyed by the addition to his family circle, and it seemed to Brett that Missis was arguing with him about her new acquisition. But after a while they both settled upon the matting,

leaving Brett to make himself comfortable on the cold floor.

Sleep was far from his mind. In the first place he was uncomfortably chilly, and with the setting of the sun, the room had become cold, bitterly so. Also he was hungry, not knowing when last he had eaten; but even those considerations did not count as high as the predicament in which he found himself.

That he was no longer on Earth he realized; knowing that nowhere upon the home planet could such monsters have managed to subsist, to develop their sciences to the high degree that was apparent. Earth's moon, Luna, as a possibility, he could discount, since it possessed no atmosphere, and Earth would have shown in its sky. Venus, too, was out of the question, for the sun's rays would surely be warmer there than upon Earth. That left Mars as a possibility, else one of the moons of Jupiter—that is, if they were still within the confines of the solar system.

But considering the distance of Sol from its nearest neighbor, some twenty-five trillions of miles, he doubted that the decapods could have brought them so far, unless their machines had a means of traversing space faster than light itself.

No, things pointed more directly at Mars, the red-planet. That red sun and copperish sky, the slightly lessened gravity-pressure, the thinness of the air, thin, as if he were breathing upon a mountain top, seemed to indicate Mars.

Sitting upon the floor, looking through the transparent ceiling of the tower-room, he was given positive proof that he was actually upon Mars. From the east he saw a moon rising, a small round globe, inordinately bright, silvering everything

around him and blotting out some of the stars by its brilliancy. But that was not all. Even as he stared at the sky, a second moon was making its appearance, but unlike the first it came out *of the west*, out of the west, wherein the sun had newly dropped; whereas the first moon had appeared coming in the opposite direction!

This second satellite was even more brilliant than the first, but that wasn't its only unique feature. It acted as no self-respecting moon should, mounting the sky in rapid strides, blotting out star after star as it progressed swiftly to its zenith, which, according to Brett's wrist watch, would be reached in less than two hours!

Although not an astronomer he remembered enough of his university studies to realize that the two moons overhead were none less than the twin moons of Mars Phobos and Deimos; whose brilliancy was due to their proximity to the surface, Deimos being only 12,000 miles or so away, Phobos, a mere 2,170 miles. It came to him, too, that Phobos' queer antics were due to the fact that its period was only about 7 hours long, whereas Deimos' revolutionary period was 30 hours, and that Phobos, in consequence, made three revolutions to Mar's single rotation, its apparent motion and actual motion being the same, so that it rose in the west and passed across the sky to the east for its setting, taking but eleven hours to travel from meridian to meridian.

Considering these factors the man was momentarily happy over his discovery, but his joy was short-lived. Mars—49,000,000 miles from home—forty-nine millions of miles of empty Space

Shivering with cold in his thin summer suit, he crouched upon one

end of the matting, awaiting morning through the long watches of a night that seemed never ending.

HE must have dozed toward morning, but with the sun's rising he heard the stirrings of the monsters on their pallet. Here was no morning ablutions, no housekeeping facilities, but he found that the decapod went elsewhere for that. Plucking him from the floor the female led the way to the open doorway and started with him to descend the tower ladder, the larger and heavier beast following. Other beasts were leaving their domiciles on all sides, a general exodus of them.

Brett's searching eyes found a number of his fellow captives; the negro, Jeff, dwelt in a tower opposite his own, and as they reached the ground he descried the Militant Matron riding the arm of her chocolate brown mistress some distance ahead. Several other beasts, he now found, possessed pets besides the new arrivals. One bore a blue-skinned fish-like creature with a flat, seal-like head and long flippers. Another carried an animal with a distinctly fish head, ogling eyes and a long squid-like body.

It came to him then that life here had come out of the sea, that possibly even now they were living on the bottom of a sea long dead. He discovered that they were headed for the lake in the center of the wide plaza. As they reached the brink the decapods were plunging in, diving and splashing lubricously. Reaching the shore his own "mistress" dived in, taking Brett with her, regardless of the fact that he was fully clothed, and the water icy. Immediately his clothes sucked up water, dragging him low. Mistaking his trouble for an inability to swim Missis fortunately kept a

hand upon him, preventing his sinking, but shortly he was blue and shivering.

As they climbed from the water at last the pair of decapods oogled his sodden condition. Hoping he could do something for himself, the decapod dropped him on the sand. Hurriedly he climbed out of his garments, wringing out the water as best he could. His action, evidently, astounded the monsters; his disrobing appearing to them as if he had peeled off his skin. As he cast aside each article they picked them up to study them, tooting shrilly at each other.

Speculatively he looked at the sun; but its wan rays told him it would be hours before they could dry the clothes for him. Dolefully he replaced his outer shirt, then his trousers, damp and clammy, and draped the underthings and coat over his arm while he stuffed his socks into his shoes to prevent the leather shrinking, slinging them around his neck by their strings.

Mister spoke impatiently to Missis and Brett was once more picked up. He found they were headed for the huge building across the plaza that was the replica of the Royal Palace. They entered at the first level wherein the decapods were already at breakfast, standing before a long twenty foot high counter that encircled the room, behind which a number of the creatures were serving them food in large bowls.

Placed upon the counter between his mistress and master, Brett looked at the food, a thick, mushy substance that gave off a faint fishy odor. With large scoops, many times bigger than a man-sized spoon, the pair of decapods prepared to devour the ten pounds or so of the stuff that their plates held, but made no offer of any

to the man. He watched hungrily as they ate. Unappetizing though the stuff looked it seemed better than nothing, his stomach was clamouring for sustenance.

Then, when he was ready to give up, deciding he was not to be fed at all, he saw Missis lay down her scoop, and reaching out to Brett, shoved him toward the dish in which a fair amount of food remained. He understood. He was to have table scraps!

The man in him wanted to rebel, but in the face of hunger fastidiousness was gone. Picking up the scoop, he managed to get it to his mouth. He recognized the food as that which had been fed to him aboard the Drumship; both his hunger and thirst were quenched by it.

Along the counter he saw others of his kind, likewise making the best of the meal, while a number of the animals native to this unknown world wolfed down their own breakfast. Across from him, sat the Militant Matron. A deep puddle of water had gathered around her, dripping from every part of her clothes; her sailor hat hung limply about her face, and yet, somehow, she managed to retain something of her dignity as she ate from her bowl, daintily, with a natural-sized spoon. She would, thought Brett, be just the one to carry such an implement upon her person.

Finishing breakfast, the next thing on the program was to see Mister off for the day. In a large open space, adjoining the plaza was a landing field in which a great number of drum-shaped ships were parked, replicas of the one that had brought them from Earth, but smaller, large enough only to hold two decapods comfortably. Missis stood with Brett upon her arm until the ship of her spouse had taken off. The ship had

Am.S.

neither propeller nor wings, but mounted straight into the air without visible means of propulsion. Brett would have given what little he owned to learn the motive principle.

All the ships turned in one direction over the city, and then Missis was returning to the lake-side where dozens of strolling decapods joined her, and among which Brett was glad to see a number of his fellows.

After showing him off to a number of her "friends" the creature placed Brett on the sand, watching warily that he did not run away. For the present he was interested only in his fellow-captives, anxious to learn how they had fared. His heart lifted when George came hurrying toward him.

CHAPTER IV

THEY each had the same experiences to relate. "They're treating us just as if we were dogs," averred George disgustedly, "as if we hadn't a grain of intelligence. And that bath! Ugh, I'm still half frozen."

Not far from where they stood the Militant Matron was talking to the pompous looking little man, whom Brett had dubbed the Senator, the woman waxing indignant over her treatment at the hands of her captors. In precise tones she was telling what she thought of creatures unable to recognize her true value, and complaining of indigestion brought on by their unnatural food, as well as her deplorable condition following her enforced wetting. Several times the Senator cleared his throat, trying to get a word in edgewise.

Huddled on the sands a little distance away were the three negroes, Jeff, the woman Mattie and the third, who was a mulatto, in a once neat over-fashionable suit, now water-wrin-

kled. The woman was moaning about the "punishment ob de Lawd." Standing by the lake, timidly surveying the others, was the spinster to whose arm clung the high-school girl in her absurdly high heels. She had made an attempt to keep herself presentable despite the condition of her bedraggled clothes. There was fresh rouge on her cheeks and lips that only made the whiteness of her face the more noticeable.

Three men, a portly elderly man who may have been a merchant, the nondescript clerk, and the fellow with the over inquisitive eyes, stood in a group discussing their predicament in low tones, glancing now and then at the decapods standing or squatting beside the lake, keeping an eye upon their charges.

Not far away, sobbing on the sands sat a small pink-faced young matron Brett had noticed the previous day. Her hands covered her face, while racking sobs shook her body.

Certainly, nowhere had Brett seen a more despondent-looking gathering. Then he forgot them all, as he discovered the girl he was hopefully seeking. She was leading the six year old child who clasped a damp kitten to her breast. Feeling his eyes upon her, the girl came to Brett's side.

"Jill is worried about her kitten," she told him, "the poor little thing seems ailing."

The child held up her kitten for him to see, but he had to admit he could do nothing for it. Snuggling it close, the tot dropped to the ground, all her concern wrapped up in the little cat.

Again the girl's eyes met Brett's. She smiled warmly, "Please pardon the dishabille, but I left home too hurriedly to have my luggage sent ahead." Then she added, "I'm Dell Wayne by the way . . ."

Her flippancy in the face of their predicament shocked him for a moment, then he grinned. He liked a girl who knew how to laugh. He realized that they may need a little laughter here. And she did look disheveled with a long slit in a water-stained silk skirt, a sagging wool sweater upon which a tie whose color was none too fast, had left a scarlet smear. Also, her hose and slippers had been removed. Carrying his own shoes and underthings and wearing only trousers and shirt he realized he himself was a none too prepossessing figure.

"I was just wondering when the next mail goes out so I can send for my wardrobe, particularly a bathing suit," he rejoined, adding, "Incidentally, my cable address is Brett Rand"

She did not answer because she was listening to the words of the "Senator" and the dehydrated spinster who came strolling along. They heard the woman saying: "Isn't this awful, Congressman Howell? Oh, you'll do something to get us out of here, won't you? Oh, I know you will. I said to Cleone—she's one of my pupils—why with Congressman Howell here, everything will be all right!"

He replied: "Ah, Miss Snowden, of course, of course—er—I shall do what I can. I shall—er—see that these—er—monsters learn who I am. The United States is not going to permit them to get away with this—er—high-handed sort of thing. Now, Miss—er—Snowden, don't worry at all. I shall have us all—er—all back home before this—er—day is over. I'm—eh hem—on my way now to see some—er—thing in—er—er—authority," And he moved away.

Dell Wayne sighed for him. "Poor dear, I'm afraid he's going to be terribly disappointed."

Brett glanced at her covertly. "You seem to have taken this thing neatly on the chin, Miss Wayne. . . ."

Her chin lifted sharply. "What else are we to do? Oh, I realize that we're in an awful position, far from home, slaves of things that don't realize our capabilities. We won't be able to stand this sort of life they're forcing on us, the cold, the dousing in the lake, the food but I guess that old saying is right—'Where there's life there's hope', perhaps we can find a way out of this mess, somehow. Can't you think of something—?"

"There's one chance—to get a ship to take us back home, but I admit that, even if I had a ship, I'd not know what to do with it," and he recounted his experiences with the machines of the decapods previous to his capture.

They spoke of these things for some minutes, each making impossible suggestions, when George came up to them carrying the eight-year-old boy, followed by a gangling fifteen year old who hung back, eying the group as he anxiously waited for them to notice him, to draw him into their midst.

"Say, can't something be done for this kid?" George asked. "He's running a fever"

Dell took the boy and brought out a handkerchief. "He's burning up. Someone wet this for me, please."

The fifteen year old, whose name turned out to be Forrest Adam, ran to do her bidding, but beyond dampening the little boy's hot face, they could do nothing for him. All he could do was to cry for his mother.

The woman who had been crying on the sand came over. "Give him to me," she ordered. "He's just the age of my little Jacky at home. We can understand each other's needs." But even as she took the boy from Dell the

beast, to whom he belonged, came to pluck him from her unwilling arms, taking him away.

Other decapods were reaching out for their charges, and Brett had only time to call goodbye to Dell and George, when, he, too, was lifted up and carried "home."

CHAPTER V

REACHING the tower-room Missis proceeded to inspect the sodden clothes Brett had been carrying, and, without so much as a "by your leave," began to undress him completely. The man tried to fight her off, but the monster paid his struggles no attention. When her little double thumbed hands stumbled over buttons, he, perforce, assisted her, rather than have her pull them off.

When that was done she commenced to dress him again, with his assistance, putting on the garments he had discarded, now half dry. Some she tried to put on backwards, but he corrected her. Yet, no sooner was he reclothed than she started the whole business of undressing him again, like a child with a new toy.

Resignedly the man allowed himself to be dressed and undressed until she tired of the play; then when she lay on her pallet for a nap, he was glad to follow suit. But he could not sleep. His mind was too full. He realized with Dell that unless something were done shortly, all those who had fallen into the hands of the decapods with him, would be dead. It was his fault entirely that George was here, but though he had tried to broach that subject, to tell how he regretted having gotten his chum into this mess, George had shut him up immediately. If it was only for what he owed George, something had to be done—

and there were those others. A plan was already forming itself in his mind, yet it was too intangible a thing upon which to put much faith.

Several days slipped by, the program being the same as on the first day, beginning with the forcible wetting in the lake, the same food, seeing Mister off in his flying ship, meeting fellow-captives on the lake-shore for an hour or so before returning to the quiet of the tower-room to await Mister's nightly return.

McCarthy and his horse, as well as the wire-haired terrier had shown up the second day, and Brett had made the acquaintance of the rest of the Earthlings, the inquisitive man who turned out to be a news reporter, the merchant, Thomas Moore, Hal Kent who was a government clerk instead of a haberdasher, Cleone, the high-school girl who usually could be found clinging to Miss Snowden's thin arm.

McCarthy's concern was only for his horse, which was evidently dying on its feet, unable to digest the food of the decapods. The fifteen-year-old, was perhaps the only happy person in the whole gathering. He had confessed to Brett that though he had read avidly all pseudo-scientific stories he could lay his hands upon, he'd never dreamed he would actually partake of such an experience. He was certain that rescue would come!

Jerry Ware, the reporter, was almost as cheerful, his mind centered only upon the scoop that should be his, when they got back "home."

And more and more Brett realized that that home-coming had to be soon. The conditions under which they were living were already telling upon the majority. Not only was the little boy, Tad, dying, but Jill was running a fever, and everyone could complain of indigestion, headaches, nausea and

colds. None of them knew what it was to be comfortable, thinly clad as they were, with what clothing they possessed rewetted each day; the nights reaching almost freezing temperatures. The fact that the kitten and horse were first to sicken, with the younger children coming down with fever, proved that the food was altogether too rich for their constitutions, and it would be only a matter of days before the adults would become feverish as well.

Considering this, on the third day, Brett suggested to those who listened the necessity of vigorous exercise to offset the ill-effects of the food. The younger members of the party were willing enough, but under the leadership of the Militant Matron, who was really a Mrs. Joshua White-Smythe, the others had other plans. She explained. "We're going to follow the canal out of this place—and walk home, if necessary. The canal must lead to a river, and rivers always go to the sea. . . ."

Brett heard and objected. "Good heavens, can't you people realize yet that you're not on Earth any longer? That it's not a matter of 'walking home'?"

There was a tense moment, then Mrs. White-Smythe swung a pair of supercilious eyes upon him. "I suppose you think we're on the moon. Silly idea. As if anyone could live on the moon—or stars!"

"I'm afraid we're a lot further away than the moon, madam. Earth is far enough away to appear as a star to us now." Brett was certain he had picked Earth from among the celestial bodies the previous night.

Congressman Howell laughed at that. "Of course we're on Earth. I know we are. We're in the Gobi desert!"

"Why, of course. Haven't scientists been finding large bones here, and calling them dinosaur bones?" sniffed Miss Snowden.

"But these creatures haven't bones—ugh—they don't feel like they have them, anyway," spoke up Cleone.

"The next thing you'll be saying," said Howell severely, "is that we're on Mars. . . ."

"We are on Mars!"

"Mars!" It was a bombshell.

Dell who had been nursing Jill in her arms came to Brett's side. "You're sure of that?"

"Gee—I knew it," cried Forrest. "Those moons, they're Phobos and Deimos, aren't they, Mr. Rand?" (So much for his voracious study.)

Brett explained his reasons for his contention, pointing out the lessened gravity force, the red-dust atmosphere, the lessened warmth of the sun's rays, the presence of the twin moons, even now showing in the daytime sky.

George nodded. "Sounds logical, Brett. I've considered the same possibilities myself, but look here—scientists claim there isn't sufficient oxygen on Mars to sustain human life. This air is thin, but breathable. . . ."

Brett agreed. "I thought of that too, but it's my conviction that this city lies in a deep depression in the surface. From my tower, I can see a distant line of cliffs on the horizon—either a mountain chain, or the rim of this valley. If it's the latter, we're on some ancient sea-bottom. That would explain why astronomers have never detected oxygen in the atmosphere—because it lies below the surface!"

"Gosh, that sounds reasonable."

"Say, you know astronomers have plotted out some 'marshy areas' that show seasonal changes," put in For-

rest, "they usually show up at the end of a canal. I guess we're in one of those areas, huh?"

"Possibly."

"Yes, but what of those seasonal changes, Brett? Observers have seen green spots, you know, following the dissolving of the icecaps."

"This, I imagine is the dry-season. I stumbled over some dried-up roots this morning. Wouldn't be surprised, if at certain seasons, some sort of vegetation grows here"

"Glory be. Let it come right away. Prince and I need it," McCarthy put in.

Suddenly there was a sobbing in the crowd. It came from Mrs. Burton, the young matron who was rocking Tad in her arms. "If what you say is true," she murmured through her tears, "then—I'll never see my John or little Jacky again"

Cleone added her tear-filled voice. "Oh, I'll never disobey Mama again. She warned me not to go to the Point to see that awful ship. Oh, I wish I was dead!"

"Hit's de punishment ob de Lawd."

No one noticed that, led by Howell and Mrs. White-Smythe, Miss Snowden, Moore, Kent, and the mulatto, Harris, were leaving the circle. Even their mistresses did not notice as they moved slowly along the like shore toward the place where the canal joined the lake.

"You'll save us, won't you, Brett?" asked Dell. "You'll find a ship and get us home—before its too late ?" She looked down at Jill lying in her arms, a tear spilling on the child's cheek. Brett noticed that her voice held a slight strain of hysteria.

He drew George aside to tell him of his plan. "I've not been idle. I've been making a play for that big brute of mine, been jumping all over him

when he gets home nights, turning hand-springs—anything and everything to make him notice me"

"Good idea, and yet"

"Oh, I know there's plenty of objections. Still its better than no plan at all"

"Sure, Brett, I'll do the same thing—perhaps one of us'll succeed."

CHAPTER VI

THAT night when Mister came home, true to his word, Brett literally flung himself on the monster, doing everything in his power to make the big fellow notice him. He had already discovered that the audibility of his voice-tones was below the sound range of the decapods; that partly accounted for the fact that the Earth people had failed in making the beasts realize their mental rating. He could roar at the top of his voice and the creatures paid no heed, no more than they heard his stirrings around in the night. Their voice-range, on the other hand, was often above his own sound-range, their lowest key was either a high "d" or "e." He could see their mouths move without hearing their voices, and the male's tones were even higher than those of the female.

Hence his only way of attracting attention was by his antics, and by taking a flying leap, with the aid of the lessened gravity, he would land high on Mister's body, clinging there until, perforce, the beast would put out a hand to steady him, or pluck him off. And the creature appeared to like these attentions. On the fourth morning he even deigned to give Brett a scoop of food from his plate.

That same night Brett found himself the recipient of a new piece of attire. It consisted of a heavy metal

girdle fastened to a forty-foot long metal cable. He had seen one of the seal-things wearing a similar belt and leash, nor did he like its implication, not guessing that later it was to prove his salvation.

In the middle of the night he became horribly sick. He was cramped, and had a dizzy headache. And like most of his companions he was suffering from a bad head-cold, that the bath of the following morning did not help.

And to make matters worse, on leaving the dining hall, Missis made use of the leash, snapping the belt around his middle and placing him on the ground. He was forced to run top-speed to keep up with her. Reaching the "air-port," he examined the girdle's buckle, but it was of an intricate mechanism that he could not unfasten. It angered him, because he had intended to run after Mister, make him understand that he wanted to spend the day with him. But the leash foiled him.

He was, of consequence, the most despondent of those gathered on the lake-shore that day, eyeing his bedraggled, ailing fellows with jaundiced eye, realizing more fully how very bad they all looked, wan, listless. Then he gave a start. He almost chuckled. Nothing could be more ludicrous than the sight before him. The Militant Matron was sporting a black-eye!

Studying her further, he discovered that she had somehow in twenty-four hours been subjected to considerable mauling. Her face bore other bruises beside the shiner, and her clothes were almost in tatters. Also she was limping. . . .

She, however, was not the only one who appeared to have sustained maltreatment. The Congressman, al-

though he did not have a black-eye, looked equally as bad as she, all semblance of neatness gone, his face scratched and bruised, while one trouser leg was ripped from knee to cuff.

Glancing quickly around Brett found others in the same pitiful condition, Miss Snowden, Moore, Kent and Harris were likewise in a ragged, bruised state. And all looked rather hang-dog about it.

Shortly, he learned what had taken place when the six had wandered away from their fellows the previous day, intent upon finding their way back to civilization. Hurrying along the canal, it seemed, they had made good progress. The canal had widened out, the towers growing more sparse, when they found themselves stalked on all sides by strange decapods. Then they had been surrounded.

At first the curious creatures had been content with poking at them, pinching them; but tiring of that, one had plucked Kent up. From one beast to another he had passed. The others struggled, but were each plucked from the ground. Then had come squabbling among the ever increasing number of monsters, those on the outskirts resenting the slowness with which their fellows examined the curiosities. Fights started here and there, until it was a wonder the Earthlings were not torn limb from limb. Only the timely intervention of a troop of decapods wielding club-like metal rods and saved them. Taken to a massive tower building they had been turned over to creatures of some authority who examined them thoroughly. Later, they had been returned to their own mistresses, much the worse for the experience.

So ended the first break for liberty.

Howell kept away from the others the remainder of the morning, but when he could catch Brett's eye, he motioned him to come to his side. "Young man," said he, "I do not believe this—er—story of yours about our being upon Mars—but—er—a—you strike me as a man to be depended upon. I heard you making plans with your young friend. Now, listen to me. You—er—get me out of here, and I'll pay you well—er—ten thousand dollars. No—I'll pay fifteen—twenty, whatever you say. Only save me. I'm sick—I'll die unless I get medical attention—but for God's sake get me home"

Brett listened quietly enough, though with every word his gorge was rising, but he managed to keep his voice under control as he asked, "And what about the others, Congressman?"

The man hemmed and hawed a moment, then: "What of them? Let them get out as best they can. After all, I am needed in Washington, I have my duty to perform. Two of us have a much better chance—whereas"

Had the man been younger Brett would have struck him down. He had much he would have liked to say, but he knew he could not trust himself if he let himself go, so he turned on his heel, after one scathing look. It was the last and only time Howell approached him, but he did, later, draw George aside. That young man, however, saw fit to give him a piece of his mind, telling Brett about it later.

"The dirty-so-in-so. Thank God, he's only one out of the rest of them. It's men like him that"

But Brett waved aside his denunciations. "Forget about him. Listen, we've got to do something. Understand? We're all sick, dying on our feet. We've got to have some setting-

up exercises to offset the richness of our food, and general conditions here. Moosey around and see if you can't start something."

"Yeah, I know. The kid, Tad, didn't show up this morning. We're afraid he's dead, and the baby Jill is getting worse. It won't help that her kitten died last night, either"

Brett's proposal was received in various ways. Howell positively refused to join the group, the negroes grumbled and refused point-blank to do anything for themselves, the three of them forming a praying bee around Mattie whose high hysterical voice was beginning to color all their dreams. Surprisingly it was the Militant Matron that jumped at the idea, organizing the group, wading in after slackers, leading the calisthenics. It was the outlet that she had needed to adjust herself. Brett grinned secretly. He bet with himself that the mayor, as well as all the *worth-while* people of her home-town, usually toed the mark when she was about.

The next day Brett had his piece of luck. Jumping at the end of his long leash, trying to make Mister understand he wanted to accompany him to the *office* that day the catch on his belt suddenly gave way, freeing him. It took him but a moment to realize his advantage, and without a backward glance at Missis, he started on a run after the departing male, about to board his ship. Making a flying leap, he landed on one of the beast's five legs, clung there for dear life.

CHAPTER VII

MISTER halted in his tracks, Missis came running up, but reaching down for the man. Brett clung to the male, refusing to be pried off. With much shrill tooting

the pair conferred. The female appeared to object to leaving her pet to Mister's care, but his careful ground-work seemed about to bear fruit. The beast hesitated.

Then to his chagrin, at a word from Missis, the male held him out to her. Shrieking at the top of his voice and digging his fingers into the leathery tentacle, Brett again refused to be freed. Missis gave him a long glance. He took it for reproach, but didn't care. Then she said something to Mister that made that worthy chuckle. Thereupon, she turned away, leaving Brett in full possession!

With beating heart he rode his master's arm. They entered the waiting machine. It contained two compartments, the first holding the controls and two queer motors, the second bare, but for a mat and a few hanging straps. High on the wall of the control room was a huge plaque studded with dials, levers and buttons, and before it hung a series of straps in which Mister slung himself.

Carefully the man, squatting on an arm, watched the decapod manipulate the controls. One small hand depressed an octagonal-shaped lever, a second hand turning, in quick succession, three knobs, each of different form. At the touch of the lever the ship was filled with a terrific roar, and with the twisting of the dials came such pressure that Brett lost consciousness.

But the spasm was of short duration, for when he reopened his eyes, they were just leaving the sanded floor of the port. Unaffected by the concussion of the take-off, the beast was twisting a long red bar, which, after he took his hand away, began to oscillate jerkily, continuing to do so all through the trip that followed.

Since the ship was made of the golden transparent metal of the decapods Brett could look in every direction. He saw that they had risen above the tower city, a thousand feet or so, and were now moving away in a straight line. Looking through the floor he could see the plan of the city, a mass of towers, intersected by two canals, dotted with plazas, an occasional monster tower rising high above its fellows. The city had more length than breadth, and he discovered that, true to his supposition, it lay in a deep depression in the planet's surface. Far away, on either side, was the rim of the valley, great dark cliffs.

They were following one of the two canals, and when the city ended abruptly, strips of some growing stuff of bright unnatural green took its place. Here and there monster gardeners tended the plants, keeping a steady flow of water in the ditches from the canal.

Where the canal made a great bend they deserted it, rising over the valley rim into a land that was naught but sand, silent dunes that lay supine, or swirled under wind-eddies. Shortly, a second city came to view, standing beside a second canal. The towers here were twice the circumference of those left behind, but much lower, none rising more than seventy-five feet. Interposed among them were other strange shapes of structures, some tall and slender, others squat and flat, or many sided. Then, there were cone-shaped edifices with the cone's point toward the ground, the wide, flat plane at the top, upheld by interlaced girders. An evil-looking, green smoke rose from many of the buildings, showing why the decapods set their factories far from their residential cities.

Between this conglomeration were

wide plazas in which flying machines were already parked, or just arriving. Other machines had preceded them or trailed them from the city of towers, while more approached from opposite directions. As soon as they landed, their pilots hurried into one or another of the various shaped piles.

Realizing they were about to land, Brett clung tightly to Mister's muscular arm, trying to keep his eyes open to watch how the landing was made. A touch halted the oscillating bar, the three knobs were twisted to their original position, and the ship was floating to a landing as lightly as a feather.

THEY entered a round building filled with activity, monsters moving among queer machines that covered most of the floor space. At one end of the long chamber stood a high counter, and it was to this desk that Mister hastened. Climbing to his hanging "chair," the decapod placed Brett on a clear space on the counter itself, pushing him down to indicate that he was to stay where he was put.

On a wide plaque in front of him was a series of bars, odd-shaped knobs and round flat keys, and without wasting time Mister set to work, depressing keys and twisting knobs. Sometimes all five hands were engaged; again only one. Brett had no idea what it was for, but as the decapod glanced occasionally at the various throbbing machines, he concluded that this control-board was, in some way, connected with them. If only he could have asked questions!

The monotony of watching those moving hands made the man drowsy. A touch, later, awoke him. Mister and he were surrounded by several machinists, the machines were stilled.

Brett was placed on the floor and was commanded by Mister's tootings to "jump." This meant turning hand-springs, somersaulting without number, making high leaps into the air, flip-flopping and what-not. Brett had always been proud of his muscular control, and Mar's gravity allowed him feats he could never have accomplished at home. Then, he was picked up, handed around as each monster examined him, texture of skin, hair and clothing.

Placed on the table again, he watched the machines restart, and for several hours Mister worked silently and efficiently at his task. Brett wondered at the activity, but there was nothing to tell him what was being done, since the room was otherwise bare except for the machines. At last, the machines were stopped once more, and there was a general exodus from the building. The work-day was at an end.

Outside, the man was the cynosure of all eyes, and had to show-off again for his master's fellows. This time, when they climbed into the flying machine, he was prepared for the take-off, managing to hold on to his senses as he watched everything the pilot did, memorizing each process.

He felt better for what little he had accomplished, having forged the first link in the chain that meant escape, but he foresaw that it was not to be as simple as he had hoped. There was the question of the ship's space-worthiness, of fuel. True, he could see no outlet but the single entrance, which, by its very solidity, pointed to the fact that, once closed, it hermetically sealed the ship. But there was also the question of how he and his companions were to manipulate those giant controls. He could, undoubtedly, reach them from the hanging straps,

but were Earth muscles equal to turning them?

His fellows crowded around him the next morning. They had guessed his absence of the previous day had to do with the workings of his plot to escape. He narrated all he had seen, but told only George of his many fears. "We know nothing of the machinery, not even how the ship is fueled. And we'll be taking a chance on its space-worthiness."

"You saw nothing that looked like fuel tanks?"

"No. My guess would be that the power is derived either from stored energy in the machines themselves or from solar or cosmic rays"

"Hum—that is a problem. But say, I tell you what. To-night, let's sneak out and give these ships a once-over, top to bottom. We can't wait much longer. Jill died in Dell's arms yesterday. She's pretty much broken up over it. Mrs. White-Smythe keeled over, too, and we had a difficult time of it, bringing her around; and several others are mighty sick" Even as he spoke George was doubled up with a cramp that twisted his face and made him catch at Brett to keep his balance.

"Yes, I realize we're all in a bad way. Getting many of those spasms, George?"

"Oh, I'm all right, so so, anyway. Yes, we've got to get out of here"

"But what's puzzling me is how we're to get out of the towers? Drop from rung to rung? You and I might manage, but how 'bout the others—the women ?"

"I've got that figured out, Brett. Most of us have leashes now, you see. Here's what we'll do," and George explained his idea. They planned to meet an hour or so after sunset, with the rising of Deimos.

CHAPTER VIII

IT seemed to Brett that Missis and Mister would never fall asleep, but at last their quiet breathing told him all was well. Tip-toeing more from habit than need, since he knew his nocturnal stirrings never disturbed them, he crept to the open doorway. Deimos was just showing over the rim of the valley leaving the ground still in shadow.

Picking up the long cable of his leash he studied the ladder below him. Luckily, one of the rungs was fastened just five feet beneath the doorway. It was broad and round, jutting out from the building's side some two feet, its end a broad knob.

Swinging over the door-sill, he felt around with his feet until he found the rung, then balancing himself carefully slid down until he straddled it. Next, he pulled the cable that he held in one hand after him, and draped it over the rung so that its ends hung clear, dangling several feet below the next rung beneath. Taking both sides of the cable in his hands, he went down until his feet met the step.

Chuckling over the simplicity of the thing, he repeated the same performance over and over again, until, at last, the ground was underfoot. For a few moments he stood listening, to discover if his descent had disturbed any of the neighbors, but the decapods were all sound sleepers, nothing stirred in the night. Coiling up the cable, he hastened, to his rendezvous.

George was at the landing field before him, since his tower home was nearer. In the moonlight he was inspecting one of the flying machines.

"You're right," he told Brett, "these things have no storage tanks

of any sort, but look here, what do you make of these?"

He pointed to a mesh-work of wires embedded in the very stuff of which the golden ship was made. In the daylight they would have appeared invisible, but the moon's rays glinted upon their surfaces, silvering them.

"Antenna! There's some way of drawing power out of the air. Whether it comes from artificial beams or from the cosmos itself, there's no telling. Possibly, we'll never know, but I'd take a chance its either solar or cosmic rays—they couldn't broadcast a beam from here to Earth. Of course, we could tell better if only we could find that big ship that brought us here"

"How 'bout trying this one out? We might as well learn if we can handle it"

Brett thoughtfully paused to consider the question before giving an answer when they both grew aware of the fact that they were not the only ones abroad in the city. Across the plaza loomed the figure of a huge decapod. In one hand it carried a long metal bar. "A night watchman" breathed George.

Luckily, they were unseen as the beast was gazing in an opposite direction. Hastily they dodged under cover among the massed machines, watching breathlessly until the police guard turned back among the towers.

"Whee—that was close! Wonder what these things have to guard against? They haven't anything for anyone to steal!"

"No telling, no more than we cannot explain lots of things about them. I guess this ends our chance at trying out the ship. No use giving our hand away yet. We've got to make the break *en masse*, and take the consequences"

They went in one of the ships to study the controls, but there seemed no connecting links between them and the motors. They were as much in the dark as before.

A paling of the stars in the east warned them that morning was at hand. Separating, they hurried to their respective towers. On the way Brett all but ran into a second guard, moving between the buildings. Again luck was with him, and he slipped out of sight. Reaching his own tower, Brett was faced with the monumental task of reascending the glassy wall.

A running jump carried him high enough to grasp the first of the ladder rungs, but from there on it was a gruelling job of lassoing each succeeding rung, standing upright and hooking the cable over the rung above his head. The sun was showing above the valley rim as he swung his foot over the sill of his chamber. In a few moments the beasts had begun to awaken.

That same morning Brett apprised their fellows of the details of the plot that George and he had carefully worked out between them. Looking around he realized that there was no time to lose. They were all sallow, pathetically thin. Everyone had a cough, sneezing and wheezing. A few had to hold their chests when coughing spasms seized them. And they were all sick from the rich, unnatural food of their captors. Even Dell who had been the most uncomplaining showed a peaked, wan face in which the blue eyes seemed over large and bright. Only the little dog, Jock, did not seem to have suffered any. Each day he had friskily re-greeted the new friends he had made.

"I'm not going to conceal any facts from you," Brett explained. "We've possibly one chance in a thousand to

get home. For one thing, these flying machines may not be hermetically sealed, and once we're out in Space, we'll suffocate—even so we don't know how long our air will suffice without renewal—not very long, anyway. Secondly, we're taking a chance on fuel. Then, again, we don't know, when once in Space, if we can find Mother Earth. None of us know a thing about spatial navigation, we're none of us astronomers, and we may miss Earth entirely—and fall into the Sun. In fact, I'm afraid that a thousand to one chance is a small margin

"But we do know one thing, and that is, if we remain here much longer, none of us'll live to tell the tale anyway. We're dying on our feet, so it's up to each of you to decide for yourself. You must come willingly"

HE did not know whether it was the "hope that springs eternal" or whether it was a fatalistic courage that caused them to give a unanimous consent, but there was not a single nay in the little gathering. Even, Mattie who had insisted right along that this was "Gawd's jedgement" found it in herself to let loose a wild Hallelujah.

Each member of the party was told just what he or she was to do as Brett warned them that the first step toward escape depended largely upon themselves, illustrating how the descent from the towers was to be accomplished. A count showed that three or four of their masters had neglected to provide their "pets" with leashes, and therefore, it fell upon several of the stronger men to help those unfortunates. The hour set for the exodus was at Deimos' rising.

As Brett flung his leg over the sill

of his doorway, he saw the dark shadow on the neighboring tower that he knew to be the big Negro, Jeff. Almost at the same time both reached the ground and, as pre-scheduled, hurried to the building that had housed the Militant Matron. They saw her peering out the third story chamber, waiting for them. She had a leash, but the nearest ladder rung was ten feet below her.

The Negro, to Brett's surprise, insisted upon going up after her, explaining that besides being a "champ-eeen" riveter who knew his scaffolds, he had also served on a western ranch as a cow-puncher. And true to his word he lassoed the rung above Mrs. White-Smythe's head, carefully paying out the cable until its other end swung to the woman's waiting hand.

Bravely the heavy matron dared put her weight upon it, carrying the Negro on the other end aloft, until she reached the rung from which he had been lifted, hanging on until he could join her on the single support. When, at last, they reached the ground she had something to say to the darky. "Boy," said she, "if you're ever out of a job you come see me. I never believed I'd get out of that place alive!"

Proceeding on their way the three picked up Jerry Ware the reporter who had with him the little school-girl, Cleone, and Mrs. Burton, impatient over any delay that might keep her longer from "John" and little "Jacky." The rest of the Earthlings were housed on opposite sides of the plaza, and were to meet them later.

Brett led the way to the great dining hall, now empty; keeping his eyes open the while for "police men," but not a single decapod showed up to halt their progress. The moonlight shone on the long high counter behind which stood the large vats of

Martian food ready for the morning horde. Bad as the food was for them, part of the plan was to carry off a few casks to sustain them upon their homeward journey, for the Earthlings had no way of knowing how long that trip was to be.

However, since there was no opening in the counter, they had to devise a way of getting the casks over it. The decapods simply stepped over the barrier, but not so the Earthlings. Jeff, the tallest and huskiest of the men was made the under-stander, and Ware climbed to his shoulders. He was slenderer than Brett, and Brett knew that the reporter could never haul either himself or Jeff to the counter's top, so it became necessary for Brett to climb up first. Standing on Jerry's shoulders, that threatened collapse, he swung himself to the edge of the counter, and managed to draw himself upon it.

Uncoiling his leash that was slung around his shoulders he dropped its end into Jerry's hand and quickly hauled him to his side. Together they drew Jeff to the counter top. It was Jeff who held the cable for Jerry and Brett to slide down to the floor on the other side where stood the vats.

The vats were great open containers, but stored to one side were dozens of tubs, six feet high and four in diameter. Turning six of them on their sides the men rolled them in position below Jeff. The cable end was tied securely around the first, and Brett skinned up the leash to stand beside Jeff and help in drawing the heavy cask to the counter-top. That done, they rolled it to the other side, and slung it to the floor where the women there untied the noose. One by one the other tubs were lifted over the counter.

As they toiled more of the party

made their appearance as scheduled, then the heavy tubs were rolled out of the hall toward the machine the Earthlings had chosen for their escape. When the containers were inside Brett counted noses. Everyone was there—except McCarthy.

The boy, Forrest, remembered having seen McCarthy that night. "I called him," he said, "but he was going the other way. He just waved and called back that he'd be along directly"

"Hum—I guess he's gone to the grave of his horse to say good-bye. He took Prince's death hard," observed George.

"Here he comes now!"

McCarthy was coming on a run, something white clutched under his arm. It was Jock, the wire-haired terrier. "Glory be," said the man as he caught his breath. "I just couldn't leave this little feller behind, even if he is only a dog" He had climbed half way up a tower to get the animal.

"Well, come on. It'll be light soon. Inside everyone!"

The fifty foot ship held them all, and the heavy door was swung closed. Then Brett and George climbed the straps until they were opposite the control plaque.

With his heart in his throat Brett tentatively touched the octagonal lever that he had watched Mister depress, after warning everyone to beware of the take-off. He was astonished at the ease with which the lever reacted under his hand. a light touch depressed it. But it was more difficult with the three knobs. It took both George and him with all their combined strength to turn them. Then, they waited for the roar of the take-off.

IT DID NOT COME!

CHAPTER IX

BRETT and George stared at one another. They could feel a slight pulsation throughout the ship, but that was all.

"Maybe we didn't twist the knobs far enough" whispered George. Brett nodded. Again they worked on them. They found they could turn them still farther; yet nothing happened!

Again the pair looked at each other, neither daring to voice his thoughts. Below them, their companions grew restive, wondering at the delay. It was Forrest who had a suggestion.

"Maybe—it's because the sun's not up—that it depends on the sun's rays"

Brett glanced thoughtfully at the boy. Perhaps he was right. One guess was as good as another. Lifting his eyes to the east, he saw that the sun would rise shortly.

A bright red was already tinting the sky. Then—gradually, so slowly it seemed it would never break the mist on the horizon, a slender sliver of blood red cut the gloom.

"THE SUN!"

Never had sun worshipers greeted that orb with more fervor, but their exultation was of short duration.

With a roar that was like a dozen claps of thunder, the ship sprang into action, mounting the sky so rapidly no one within witnessed the take-off. Thrown to the floor by the terrific pressure, they lost all consciousness and the machine was a wild thing climbing straight into the heavens.

Out of the blackness of oblivion Brett, at last, opened his eyes. He found himself on the floor below the strap to which he had been clinging. Beside him lay George, not yet stirring. Here and there someone moaned,

tried to get up. And it was only by concentrating all his will that Brett was able to lift a hand, then his head, and lastly his body. It was as if a thousand pound weight held him down.

He realized that the copper-sky was already losing some of its color, that Mars was dwindling rapidly beneath him.

Panting, he strove to reclimb the straps, to reach the controls. Fighting the pressure was like fighting a monster. He got to his knees, bringing one foot forward to jack up his body. A hanging strap came within reach of a hand, and that helped. His climb upward was a bitter thing to watch, so slow, so painful as one dragging hand followed the other, like something out of a nightmare, or a slow-motion camera.

Opposite the controls at last, he was uncertain of what to do. Should he twist the red lever as Mister had done to level off the flight? Or twist the dials to starting point? Sluggishly his mind milled over the question, then he decided, first to start the oscillating bar.

Eyes blurred with the sweat of his gigantic effort, he felt rather than saw the bar. The lightest of taps started it oscillating and he almost screamed with joy when he found the pressure subsiding. Soon, he was feeling normal again.

The others were rising to their feet; George climbed the adjoining strap to his side. "We've done it! We've done it!" came the cries from all sides, as they forgot the ordeal they had just experienced, staring with fascinated eyes at the copper ball rolling off to the right, its form becoming more evidently diminishing. They had left Mars behind—were in free space!

For a while George eyed the oscil-

lating bar. Then he spoke. "Now what?" he wanted to know. "How do we guide this thing?"

Brett pointed to the bar. "Mister swung that right or left—but your guess is as good as mine. Where is Earth?"

Together they looked into the great panorama of the firmament spread out before them like a great black velvet mantle dotted with multicolored jewels. The sun glowered at them like an evil enraged eye.

"There's the sun, directly ahead. Ugh what a furnace. Earth must show somewhere in its vicinity—with Mercury and Venus. We ought to know it because it will show its phases to Mars, like the moon does to Earth"

"Righto There—see that pale green star there—see, about a degree beyond the silver crescent—in half-moon. That's Earth, George, I know it is!"

GEORGE studied thoughtfully, turning now and then to eye other glittering objects round about. After a while he was ready to conclude that the greenish half-moon was Earth, the silvery body below it, Venus. "If only we could see the moon alongside, we could be certain."

On the floor beneath them was Forrest listening to their conversation. Suddenly he cried out. "There it is! See that faint glow of light along the dark side? It's the moon—LUNA!"

They, too, found the light-glow he spoke of, showing faintly along the planet's limb. It was sufficient to convince them that the pale green planet was Earth. But how to head their ship in that direction was their quandary. It seemed that the ship lay in a course diagonally across the heavens.

Tentatively Brett touched the oscil-

lating red bar fearing to halt it altogether, but it did not stop as it moved in its socket. They waited breathlessly. "It's working" cried George, "only we're swinging more directly toward the sun"

Again Brett pushed the stick ever so slightly. Again they waited. The sky seemed to swing around them as the green half-moon moved slowly until it lay directly in their path. Those below who had listened quietly to the pair of engineers cheered, certain now that their pilots were to bring them home—safely.

"Guess there's nothing else to do here now, Brett. Might as well climb down and let the ship do the rest"

But Brett thought differently. "No, one of us must stay on duty at all times—to keep an eye on the 'stick.' We can know if the ship leaves her course by centering Earth just above the plaque. See that little finger-like piece sticking up? We'll go by that. Right now it cuts Earth in half."

"All right. I'll take the first trick."

Of those aboard, only McCarthy possessed a watch that ran, since it was encased in a water-proof jacket. Now he wound it up. George was to take a four-hour shift, then Brett would relieve him, trying to get some sleep in the meantime.

As he slid down the strap Brett found Dell awaiting him. "You've been wonderful," she averred, "If only we could have saved the children, everything would be top-hole."

Brett waved aside her congratulations. "We're not there yet," he pointed out. He was sorry as soon as he had said that, but he needed something to cover up his embarrassment. And Dell understood. She chuckled happily. "Do you know—when we *do* get home, I'm going to start a movement to release every pet in the land!"

"Now I know what it means to a dumb brute thrown in with creatures whose language is not its language, who make their will its will."

"I guess there's a lot in that—not being able to talk back. God knows it's been a horrible enough experience for all of us." He wanted to say more, but he seemed to be going to sleep on his feet. The girl noticed his discomfort, and suggested that he rest. He scarcely knew that he lay down, falling asleep almost as soon as he reached the bare floor. He hadn't had any sleep to mention in the last three or four days. But it seemed almost immediately that they were waking him again. Someone was shaking his shoulder, crying in his ear. "Brett, Brett—wake up. The DECAPODS HAVE CAPTURED US!"

CHAPTER X

SLEEP was immediately banished. Rising to his feet he stared out of the ship's transparent wall, to behold an awesome sight. For there—scarcely a thousand yards away, loomed the great Drum-Ship of the Decapods.

"They're dragging us back to Mars!"

The men were grim-faced, the women in tears. Mattie was moaning and praying at the same time.

A glance told him it was true. Far more swiftly than they had come, the Drum-Ship was dragging them back, away from the sun, away from the Earth, back toward Mars There was no visible grapple, but such a bond existed now between the two ships nevertheless.

In terse words George told what had happened. How, suddenly, the huge ship had come upon them, invisible until it was quite close; then the

sun glinting on its golden sides appraised them of its proximity. But they hadn't realized, at first, that it had them in its grip.

Brett climbed to the controls to see that nothing had been touched, only now the oscillating bar was swinging aimlessly back and forth. For a moment he studied the bank of controls, a row of buttons whose purpose he did not know. He pointed these out to George. "Shall we try them? No telling what they're intended for"

George agreed. "I thought of them, yet was afraid to try them out."

"It can't hurt to try. Death awaits us on Mars. I'm going to try this first green button here. Hold on" And as he spoke he pressed the first of a row of six green buttons that studded the bottom of the control bank.

Breathlessly they waited. Nothing happened!

"Wrong," muttered Brett, and he pressed the second.

"THEY'RE FALLING BEHIND!" went up the cry in the ship.

Looking around Brett saw this was true. It appeared that they were stationary, that the larger ship was rapidly dwindling in size. "Whatever you did," cried George jubilantly, "you've counteracted their power" Then—"Good Lord—here they come back!"

As he cried out the enemy grew larger, racing down upon them.

Brett gave his full attention to the controls, again twisting the three great knobs to the full extent of their thread, then he juggled the "stick," until Earth once more lay directly in their path. Difficult though it was to judge their rate of acceleration, it seemed that their own ship gained on the other, the growth of the pursuer being less rapid than before. Still it was evident that the Drum-Ship pos-

Am.S.

essed a greater speed, eating up the short advantage they had gained almost immediately.

"Well," he said somberly. "I guess there's nothing else to do but try the rest of the buttons. Here goes."

As he spoke he depressed the third button! A cry of astonishment went up in the ship. They could no longer see outside; they were enveloped in a hazy aura that enclosed the entire machine. And the next instant the whole ship rocked, seemed to tilt—then righted itself.

THEY waited, and again there came a rocking that ceased after a few moments. When the third rocking came and passed, Brett cried out: "They're firing upon us from the big ship"

As if to prove his words their ship rocked again. After that, however, it did not come again, though five, ten minutes passed.

"Think they've given up?"

"Maybe, but I don't like this fog around us. Wonder what the next button will do?"

"Try it," ordered George.

This time the haze faded away; again they could see the Void wherein the Drum-Ship loomed like a great evil eye a thousand yards behind.

"LOOK OUT! THEY'RE GOING TO FIRE AGAIN!"

Brett had seen the pencil of light leave the ship's side even as George yelled, and at the same time he punched the third button again. Immediately they were reenveloped in the haze that was like a shining white fog. The rocking was heavier than before, tossing the machine around like a cork.

"I've got it! This haze is a power screen to protect us from their rays.

Wonder if this ship's got one of those rays?"

"THE FIFTH BUTTON!" declared George.

Brett nodded. "Yeah—but how do we use it?"

"Their ray seems to come directly from the front of their ship—perhaps, if we turned around?"

Brett lost no time in acting on the suggestion, shoving the oscillating stick about. They could feel no movement, but when he had the stick pointing at right-angles to its former position he depressed the button that dissolved the power screen, keeping a finger close to the accompanying button in case the Drum-Ship had the march on them.

It lay in the same position as before, its very presence a menace, but Brett found that their ship was somewhat off center. Again he moved the "stick," bringing the control panel in direct line with the big ship.

Then, his hand went to the fifth button on the panel before him. And at the same time the Drum-Ship struck.

A cry went up from the watchers. Some covered their faces with their hands, others stared, grim-faced, waiting

The two rays had met. Almost in dead center between the ships. There was a terrific flash of lurid, evil light, though no sound came to them in that soundless void. Brett did not wait as he flashed on their power screen once again.

He waited a reasonable time before lifting the screen. George was ready to depress the beam button, so that almost simultaneously, with the flashing out of the screen, the pencil ray cut the blackness.

A shout went up in the little ship

as the long light-beam impinged itself upon the shell of the decapods' ship, but Brett did not wait to learn the result, hiding their ship immediately within their protective cloud. He let five minutes go before he dared look out.

The big ship was still there, its distance greater, however, although it was unscathed, wrapped now in a dense brilliant cloud that sparkled like diamond facets in the sun's rays that it had imprisoned.

Disappointment filled the hearts of the Earthlings as Brett again reenveloped them in their own screen. "There's nothing to be done," he admitted, "but to go on. As long as we have the screen we're safe, and *vice-versa*. We'll turn about and try to head for home"

As he spoke he pressed the "stick" back to its original position, releasing the screen long enough to center the focus of the ship on the green half-moon that was "home." A glance backward showed that the enemy was still clothed in its fog.

HE ordered George to get some rest, suggesting that it was time for the serving of some food. Jerry had pilfered a half a dozen scoops, the only ones within reach when they raided the dining hall, and the Earthlings lined up for their rations. When they had all eaten sparingly, those who could bring themselves to compose their minds for sleep, did so, disposing themselves as best they could on the bare floor. The women gathered in the adjoining room for what little privacy it offered them with only a transparent wall between.

Brett slid down his strap to the floor. Forrest came to his side. "Gee, Mr. Rand, you were great. You know this is just like the stories I read,

only I wish you could have 'gotten' that ole ship out there"

"I wish so too, but it looks like stale-mate for the present. No use risking ourselves. Later, perhaps, they'll grow careless."

He looked around for Dell, and saw her in the other room bending over one of the women. Walking to the small machines in the center of the ship he studied them speculatively. From them came the soft throb that filled the air, yet he could see no moving parts. Then, for the first time he noticed a feature he had not seen before.

In the floor was a circular disk, about four feet in diameter. In its center was a smaller disk set below the floor's level. Hesitantly he reached out a hand to touch it. And at his touch the whole piece of the larger disk moved aside, revealing a circular chamber about a foot deep. On its floor was a second knob like the one on the plate above.

"I wonder," he said aloud, and looked for something detachable upon his person. A button on his sleeve filled his want, and he tugged until it came free. Laying it on the lower disk, he closed the upper one and waited, but nothing happened. Through the transparent metal he could see the button lying as he had placed it.

"Must be some sort of control" he muttered. "Ah—here it is" He had discovered a tiny lever, scarcely an inch long imbedded in the knob, and he shoved it over with his thumb. Staring through the top disk he saw the floor beneath fall away, revealing the emptiness of Space. The button slid off the disk, and then the contraption closed automatically with a snap.

"An air-lock!" he mused, "Gosh, had I found that before, I'd have known for certain this ship was air-

tight. A nice little arrangement to throw away trash"

Several hours later he climbed to the control panel. Releasing the fog screen a minute he verified their course, replacing the screen again. A single glance behind revealed the decapods' ship still wrapped in its protective shroud of glistening light. Then his eye fell upon the sixth button of the series that had proven so providential. What, he wondered, would that button do?

After a moment's hesitation he decided to risk it, and pressed the key. To his surprise a small circular portion of the panel slid to one side revealing a smooth polished surface on which dots of light shone. A startled glance showed him a greenish half-moon held in dead-center of the disk. He almost shouted with joy! No longer need he switch off their power screen to determine their position, for this was no less than a vision-screen. They no longer were flying blind!

CHAPTER XI

HOURS slipped by. George awakened, and most of the others roused themselves. They dined again, and George took his place before the controls. Brett suggested now that they give the women more privacy than they had. He had noticed a number of hooks stuck in the partitioning wall, and decided that a screen could be provided if each man relinquish either his suit coat or outer-shirt. It was warm in the ship, and they would not need them. Mrs. White-Smythe contributed her suit coat, and Mrs. Burton had a silk jacket, so that a sizable curtain could be hung by means of one of the "dog-leashes" across the wall.

"Now, if we had some water, we

could make ourselves half-way presentable," observed Dell looking at her unwashed hands.

"We've got water," declared Forrest. "One of those tubs is full. Shake it, and you can hear it gurgle"

A rush was made toward the cask he designated. The top was pried off (a small handle was provided on each tub for that purpose) and sure enough water was found within.

Brett considered. Their food precluded the need of drinking water, yet the very sight of it made him thirsty. He saw several people running a tongue over their lips. They would all enjoy a cooling drink. But he shook his head. He feared that once they started on the water, they would want more and more, and one barrel would not last long. Yet, they'd all feel better if they could lave their dry skins. He explained all this, but there was only one dissenter. It was Congressman Howell.

"Since when are you giving orders, Mr. Rand?" he wanted to know. "I don't recall any election of officers for this cruise"

Brett looked up in surprise. There had been no selection of officers, and actually there seemed no need. He had simply taken the lead up to this point, because it seemed the only natural thing to do, especially since no one else had demanded the job.

A deep silence followed Howell's words. Brett started to answer. "You're right, of course, I"

But he got no further. It was the Militant Matron who spoke up. "I think Mr. Rand's done an excellent job of it so far, Congressman, and if there's any point in electing him—I, for one, cast my vote for him. Without him, we'd still be back there—on Mars," (So she admitted the truth now). "He's been the only man here

with guts—yes, I said guts—to rescue us, and I think he should be our captain. How 'bout it, folks?"

She turned to the others, and her response was a cheer from all sides. Disgruntled Howell slipped away.

Taking turns with the five food scoops (the sixth was used as a ladle) each man and woman received their water ration. They could do no more than wet their faces and hands with it. However, one of the women had the brilliant idea of dumping all their water into the airlock receptacle in their room (a second lock had since been found in that chamber) and using the combined water to wash out such clothing as they could manage.

Brett in the meantime ran his hand through his straggly beard as he waited his water ration, wishing for a razor to remove it. But he knew, or thought there wasn't one in the crowd; that is until Forrest sidled over to him.

"Want a razor, Mr. Rand?"

Brett looked up and grinned.

"I got one," admitted the boy in a whisper as he ran a hand over his virgin chin. "Some older fellows were kidding me 'bout not shaving yet—back home, you know. So the day the decapods came—I had bought a razor. I—I thought I'd shave and make the hair grow.

"I never said anything about it before, 'cause I thought I'd get laughed at, but if you told 'em I bought it for my dad"

The man could have hugged him. The razor, an ordinary safety affair was rusted, but he did not care. He almost shouted when Forrest brought out a tube of shaving cream that all this while had reposed in his pocket.

The others crowded around, begging for next go. Forrest insisted his

hero have the first shave, the others, he said with a negligent wave of his hand, could draw straws for it—or something.

The backing of the power screen made a dim mirror of the ship's walls, and Brett used that for his shave. After some difficulty in hacking away the hirsute growth, and nicking himself more than once he managed a fairly clean shave. Then he relinquished the razor to the next in turn. Luckily, the boy had likewise purchased a package of blades. Each man kept his blade for further use.

Dell made her appearance with the other women. "I feel like a new woman," she laughed, "One could scarcely believe that a little water could work such wonders"

The effect of their ablutions was to give the Earthlings a new lease on life, an uplift in their morale. Their eyes had brightened, and their cheery voices filled the ship.

When it came his turn at the controls Brett again threw off the power screen to ascertain if the decapods were still on their trail. No sooner was the screen replaced than a rocking shook the ship. The decapods were most assuredly on their tail.

He conferred with George. Should they again attempt to rid themselves of the enemy? They decided to consult the others on the momentous question. The majority vote was for War!

ONCE more the ship was swung out of its course, turned about so it could face the enemy, and Brett worked until the big ship lay centered in the vision screen. Then with one finger he depressed the button that released their own screen, while almost immediately, he switched it on again. There followed a rocking of the ship as a pencil beam from the de-

capods' machine flashed across the Void.

Twice he used the same tactics, and twice the other struck; but the third time the decapods resorted to the same strategy, dropping their own screen. Instantly Brett shot out his ray. It worked.

"A HIT! A Hit!" cried George, and they saw the big ship stagger, side-slip and try to right itself. Only it could not. It was careening wildly, from side to side. But the decapods were not done yet. A white beam cut the blackness, but the ray was wild, and did not come anywhere near their ship.

Twice the decapods attempted to restore their protective screen, and though it flashed on each time, it faded almost instantly. Again Brett used his ray upon it, but now the other was quickly dwindling in size and the range was too great.

For several minutes they followed it, but hurt though it was, the big ship could accelerate more quickly, and was swiftly moving away—back in the direction from which it had come—back to Mars

Breathing a sigh of relief the pilot turned about, heading for Earth once again. Earth was still far, far away, and there was no way of computing how long the voyage would be.

With no further interruptions the monotony of space began to tell upon the travelers, voices grew low, eyes lack-luster, bodies listless with nothing to occupy mind or body. They commenced to hate the sight of food, most of them suffering from cramps as well as from the colds they had brought from Mars.

Brett commenced to wonder if they *should* reach home alive. He realized he was feeling pretty rotten himself, only the excitement of the escape and

the fight with the decapods had taken his mind from it, but now that he had time to allow himself to dwell upon his condition, he knew that he was actually sick.

Endless hours slipped by, and with them the sickness aboard grew apace. Clarice and Mrs. Burton were very sick, staying in the other room, not even coming out at meal time. Mattie who had taken to prayers again, calling upon God as witness to their sins, sometimes forgot to pray as she moaned instead. Miss Snowden sat slumped in a corner most of the time, and the Militant Matron, though she tried to help Dell cheer the others, was visibly sick. Several men were in the same condition, refusing food, and Forrest's eyes were over-bright.

Swung in the seat woven from the overhead straps facing the control panel or lying in his corner Brett found that there were long lapses of time in which his mind seemed away from his body. His body grew to be something unattached, his lucid moments becoming fewer and fewer. Sometimes he thought he was on Mars, sometimes at his desk in the Bureau of Standards back home. Sometimes he heard himself talking aloud, to no one in particular.

"It's the food," he heard Dell mutter to George one time. "It's rotting"

That woke him up. He hurried to the open tub they were using, three of the others were empty. He tasted it, and only with effort kept from retching. It was rotted.

He called George. "Let's open the last barrel." It too was rotting. "No more food," he said.

The next meal time, only water was doled out from the now half-empty barrel. No one seemed to notice the

change, nor care. Brett crawled up to the control board to check the course. The green mantled Earth lay in dead center of the screen, but it still seemed far away. He grew panicky. Perhaps they no longer moved!

CHAPTER XII

FOR a long time he stared at that far away globe. For a time he forgot what it actually was; it had revolved into a symbol, a symbol of attainment, but outside that he could not remember. It seemed that the Void had always been, all that he had ever known. Only he could not put out of his mind that deep longing he felt for that greenish half-globe with its diminutive moon alongside, for Luna had since detached itself slightly from the side of Earth and rode the darkness, shedding its light on the mother planet.

Once some one aroused him to tell him that Clarice was dead, and Mattie was fast sinking, but the words scarcely meant anything. He knew that Kent had already passed away, and that several others were in a deep coma from which they could not be aroused.

The next time his brain roused itself he became aware of a distinctly unpleasant odor around him. He puzzled over it a while before he realized that it came from their fouled food supply. Something snapped within him, and he was more fully alert than he had been for some time. He realized the need of ridding the ship of the stuff. Before this, he had puzzled about their air-supply, afraid that that might also give out on them, but he had come to know that one of the ship's two motors was designed to keep it clean and pure. Only with that putrefaction rising from the tubs, the

air would soon grow stale. They had to be emptied.

Glancing about for help he saw George sleeping, making vague stirrings that bespoke a troubled body. Moore, the merchant, lay supine, snoring spasmodically, the little rolls of fat gone from his face, his skin an unhealthy yellow. Howell lay in a strange unnatural position. Leaning over him Brett realized he was dead. The mulatto, Harris, was doubled in a knot, sweat streaking from his face. Jeff the big Negro and Jerry the reporter seemed the only two that looked normal. Forrest was breathing with difficulty, and McCarthy lay with an arm around the dog, mumbling in a delirium. Shaking Jeff and Jerry away Brett told them what had to be done. None of them were strong enough for the task, but together they managed to push the pair of casks to the air-lock, tip them over so their contents spilled into the small receptacle. When it filled up, they closed and dumped it. This procedure had to be repeated many times, the three of them suffering time and time again over their ugly task as the evil smell of the mass affected them. They were forced to scoop out the bottoms, but at last it was finished, the casks tightly closed.

THE dead presented another problem, but they did not like the thought of consigning them to space. Dragging the bodies to one side they covered them with a few coats taken from the screen shielding the women.

On, on drifted the ship of death, moving slowly toward its objective. From his place on the floor Brett raised his eyes from time to time to the body of George slumped within the straps above his head, eyes closed. But those facts scarcely registered

upon his brain as he drifted again into the unreal realm of a deathlike sleep. Several times he sought to drag himself out of his lethargy, but each time the effort was too great. He did not know that like a sleep-walker he had gotten up a number of times to wander among the others, putting a hand to a forehead here and there. When next he awoke, he found his arms wrapped around a thin though warm body.

Focusing eyes with some difficulty he found that it was Dell Wayne who lay within his grasp. He was startled by her appearance, her sunken cheeks, the depths of her eye sockets. He grew frightened, fearing that she was dead, and laid his head upon her heart. It beat. The movement awakened her. Somehow she managed a smile. "Brett—good Brett," she murmured in a scarcely audible voice. "I—I guess this is the end— isn't it? It's been nice knowing you—Brett"

The import of her words fell upon him, and suddenly he knew he did not want to die. "NO—No we shan't die—we can't. We've come too far together for that—I can't let you die—you understand? Why, Dell—I love you—I love you. We can't die—yet"

She did not answer, smiling at him instead, an enigmatical smile. Then, they both were silent, drifting again into that half-way death of sleep.

The first shout did not rouse them, nor the second. It took a heavy shaking on the part of the boy, Forrest, to awaken them. "Earth—" he was shrieking "Earth—in our path. Can't you understand? We're almost—home—HOME!"

The last word did it. Brett woke, staring wildly into the wilder eyes of the boy. "Home?" he asked querulously, "HOME?"

Then he was struggling to his feet, dragging Dell with him. He glanced out the ship's side (the power screen had long since been down, after they had ascertained that the decapod ship was really gone). It was true. Before them, filling most of their sky, loomed the broad green globe of Earth. To one side shone a thin sliver of the moon. They were already within Luna's orbit.

Weak though he was Brett managed to climb up to the control panel, staring with yearning eyes at the great body before him, picking out the familiar features of the continent as the globe was turning slowly, half in darkness, half in light.

How long he hung there in the straps, he did not know. Below him he could hear the stirrings of his fellows, almost all aroused now by Forrest. He knew it must have taken hours, that slow approach to the globe, but it did not matter, nothing mattered as the lineaments of Earth grew before his eyes, sometimes blotted by that line of darkness. Gradually it lost its globular form, horizons straightened out, and with a suddenness that startled him, he found that the sky around them was no longer dead black—that it was taking on color—pale blue at first, then deeper and deeper. They were well within the atmosphere blanket!

Now it seemed they were falling, falling too swiftly as land and water rushed up to meet them. "Do something, do something," his brain commanded, "do something before we crash."

The knobs—three of them must be turned. With both hands he tugged and pulled; then someone was helping him, and he found it was George. The ship leveled off, and now the same speed that had seemed so incredibly

slow out in space swung them rapidly through the air, five miles or so above the landscape. Again the acceleration was lessened and Brett jiggled the "stick." They had reached Earth at its most southern point, and he turned the ship northward.

Those who had the power to do so had risen to their feet, crowding to the walls to stare hungrily at the twilighted land beneath. Night came upon them, and still they moved on, on. Brett knew when they crossed the equator by the constellations; steered his course by the pole-star. Dawn was breaking when he realized they lay off the Virginian coast. There was that great arm of land that was the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay. He headed the ship over the bay, followed it, trying to name the rivers emptying into it.

He found the river he sought, the lordly Potomac and followed its course. Soon they saw the beautiful pattern that was Washington, the tiny sliver of stone that was the Monument. A few minutes later the ship hovered above Haines Point, and Brett halted the oscillating stick.

Instantly the ship nosed down, dropping evenly to the ground, forward motion halted. As the land came up to meet them, George and he twisted the three dials to neutral. The journey was at end.

Like a feather the ship settled upon the grass of the municipal golf-links, not far from the spot, where, on that memorial day, five weeks since, the great Drum-Ship of the decapods had rested.

Again Washington had witnessed the early morning arrival, but there were only police, and soldiers to receive the travelers. Bolling Field and the Naval Airdrome had dispatched planes to the scene, machine-guns pointed downward menacingly. A shout of wonder greeted the first of the emaciated passengers to disembark. Willing hands helped them, while those unable to walk were carried out tenderly.

A week later Brett Rand with an arm around his wife received the news-reporters in his brother's home. Still thin and wan from their experience the pair expressed their joy of being "home."

"I'm going to make a life work of freeing every animal pet in the land!" declared Mrs. Rand when asked if she was going to follow a "career."

"After our honeymoon," Brett said, "George and I are going to study the decapod ship. They are great things to be learned there, mechanisms entirely new to science"

"And that, boys, is one tall order!" It was George, speaking from the shadows.

THE END